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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001602

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SUBJECT: THAILAND POLITICAL UPDATE: MARCH 15

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Alex A. Arvizu, reason 1.4 (b) (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Thaksin's comments to the press have sparked speculation that he might be considering stepping down, or declaring a state of emergency. Neither will be attractive to him, but his third option, winning the elections on April 2, is looking more problematic: the Electoral Commission is expected to disqualify as many as 200 candidates, potentially leading to a "hung" election. Pro-Thaksin demonstrators may try to come into Bangkok, raising the possibility of a confrontation with anti-Thaksin protesters. The police have performed well and with restraint thus far, but fatigue is becoming a problem for them. End summary.

HE'S GOING

12. (C) Thaksin's comments while on the campaign trail upcountry are fueling fevered speculation in the capital. While riding elephants and participating in arcane local rituals during his campaign swing in provinces along the Cambodian border, Thaksin told the press that a) he was prepared to sign a decree introducing a state of emergency and b) he might consider a proposal to take a temporary break from being PM. According to a wire service report, he said, "This does not mean that I would bow to mob rule. I have to take some time to consider and decide what to do, because I have a duty to complete my mission." TV Viewers also note that he referred to a Buddhist principle which advises believers not to cling to that which is impermanent.

HE'S NOT GOING

13. (C) The Ambassador spoke today with key Thaksin advisor Pansak Vinyaratn, and with Foreign Minister Kantathi about the PM's statements. Both cautioned against reading too much into the accounts in the press, saying that the PM had no intention of stepping down. In a conversation with Privy Councilor Surayud Chulanont, the Ambassador asked about the reported threat to impose a state of emergency. Surayud noted that Army Supreme Commander Sonthi had stated that he would not intervene with the protesting crowds, as that would be "undemocratic." The Ambassador pointed out that the government side knows violence would work against its interests in the long run, whereas the protesters are led by several individuals, such as Gen. Chamlong, who have a track record of provoking violence. Surayud countered that those individuals on the anti-Thaksin side would not want to engage in a violent provocation unless they could reliably cover their tracks, and that would be difficult under the current circumstances. (Septel reports further on Surayud's views).

WHERE ARE THEY GOING?

¶4. (C) The plans of two groups of pro-Thaksin farmers, from the North and from the Northeast, are still uncertain. Approximately 6,000 people, according to press reports, are converging on Bangkok by bus and tractor. According to the Highway Police, both groups are within a few hours drive of Bangkok and may be planning to set up their own, pro-Thaksin rally, at the Royal Plaza, which is uncomfortably close to the anti-Thaksin sit-in at Government House. A Thai Rak Thai MP candidate reportedly is trying to organize the rally. However, we understand that the police may try to hold the groups on the outskirts of town if they do reach Bangkok.

THIS ELECTION IS NOT GOING SO GOOD

¶5. (SBU) The Electoral Commission is scheduled to make its determination today on the eligibility of candidates for the April 2 poll. The official results are not yet available, but election officials are telling the press that they disqualified over one-third of the contestants, and that TRT will have the sole candidates in about 70 percent of constituencies, including some in the South and in other strongholds of their opponents. The possibility of a "hung" election becomes ever more likely.

GO, ALREADY

¶6. (U) Protesters sitting in at the Government House expressed dismay that the PM had availed himself of the magical assistance of a Cambodian shaman during his campaign swing along the border. Two senators led the protesters in a

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ceremony of their own, in which Thaksin was ritually cursed three times. The senators told the crowd to curse Thaksin to leave office and flee to Singapore.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) Despite the denials of Thaksin's associates, we think it is significant that he has even mentioned the possibility of temporarily stepping down. Previously, he had insisted he would never, ever resign. We are reminded of the shift late last month, when Thaksin went from insisting he would never dissolve Parliament, to telling the Ambassador that he could do that if he liked, and then to doing it. Thaksin is probably considering the idea of declaring a state of emergency, that move would be viewed as precipitous and unwarranted by many, and would no doubt invite a strong negative backlash. If the Election Commission indeed announces results tomorrow that cast serious doubt on the prospects for holding a valid and credible election, the debate within TRT between these two options is certain to intensify. End comment,
BOYCE